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ABSTRACT

Public schooling was restructured and reoriented in fundamental ways during the decades immediately preceding the First World War. Schools were engaged in the process of preparing people for specialized work roles, but reformers were also concerned that the schools inculcate common social values. A wide range of extracurricular activities was established during this period and justified on the basis of their cultivating appropriate social attitudes. Prominent physical educators began stressing social and psychological aims of their subject early in the century. Spurred on by the preparedness crisis of World War I, physical education programs for boys did not enter high schools on a large scale until the 1920s. Until then, popular team sports, like football and basketball, usually preceded physical education programs into the high schools and were student controlled, maintained a separate identity, and were "rife with corruption." By the 1920s, athletics were under school control, with competition between teams in most states regulated by conferences. Two controversies continue to surround high school athletics: (1) popularity and intensity of interschool sports; and (2) their exclusiveness. (JMK)

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SPORTS AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS: SOME HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

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The period between the turn of the century and World War I was a fortunate one for school athletics and physical education. This paper attempts to analyze the historical development of high school programs in sports and P.E. during the pre-war period, and then to trace them through the 1920s and '30s. At the end of this brief historical tour, we will hazard some speculation about the relationship between athletics and physical education and their proper roles in the school.

The analysis will concentrate on the years falling roughly between 1900 and 1940 and, with respect to interscholastic athletics, will be focusing primarily on the popular team games--football and basketball. It will also be limited to programs for boys. The decision in this case is dictated by expediency rather than preference. The emphasis in this paper reflects the current limits of my research. The neglect of girls' sports programs on my part need not ban them completely from the reader's consciousness. Role models in those days were explicitly delineated, so a discussion of the aims of sports and P.E. for boys immediately raises questions about expectations for females.

The origins of organized sports and physical education should be considered in the context of the reforms of the Progressive Era encompassing the years between 1890 and World War I. Workmen's compensation, compulsory attendance legislation, laws banning child labor, the establishment of juvenile courts, and attempts to regulate corporations were all products of those years. In various ways they all reflected an attempt to rationalize a society confronting immigration and economic concentration, and troubled by poverty and labor strife. Many progressive reforms posed administrative solutions to social problems and envisioned a more extensive role for public institutions.[1]

The Progressive Era was also the formative period for the modern public high school. The story of high school sports and physical education is part of this larger story of Progressive school reform, and so we will begin there.

Historians of education disagree, often heatedly, about the nature of school reform during the Progressive Era. Some maintain that with all of its shortcomings, the public school provided a genuine opportunity to enter a wider world for the millions of working class children who passed through its doors. Others, while acknowledging that cases of individual mobility were common, nonetheless maintain that the school was transformed into an instrument to ratify social stratification or to reproduce the inequalities of the social class system.

What is clear is that public schooling was restructured and reoriented in fundamental ways during the decades immediately preceding the first World War. Elites in education and like-minded allies in business and the professions sought to fashion schooling in accordance with their vision of an emerging industrial society. We can say with considerable certainty that the school system bears the stamp of such coalitions. However, although some local studies have been done, I think we do not have a very clear picture about how working class families felt about or responded to initiatives of these elite reformers.[2]

A complex national economic system seemed to demand coordination and administrative expertise on an appropriately large scale. Many, including corporate executives themselves, believed competition needed to be tempered by regulation.[3] There was certainly a place for individual ambition and competitiveness in the reformers' vision, but they felt that these individualistic qualities needed to be disciplined by a sense of interdependence

and teamwork. Efficient citizenship seemed to demand more social cooperation than ever before.

The task of creating common values and allegiances was given a heightened sense of urgency by the changing patterns of school attendance after 1890. Not only were immigrant children pouring into urban elementary schools, but sons and daughters of working class parents were enrolling in high schools in large numbers for the first time in American history. Enrollment swelled with each passing decade, increasing by a whopping 711% from 1890 to 1918. Not until the 1940s would graduation rates reach 50%, but it was clear to leading educationists in the early decades of the century that the high school was becoming a crucial agency in the socialization of American youth.[4]

The basic and far-reaching changes in secondary schooling during the Progressive Era reflected the conception of cooperative citizenship articulated by elite school reformers. With the establishment of vocational guidance programs and various vocational curriculums, schools began to assume a more explicit responsibility for sorting, training, and certifying students for places in an emerging occupational hierarchy. The idea that equal educational opportunity meant different curriculums for different jobs was strengthened by the view that the majority of students entering high school could not be expected to profit from an academic education.[5]

But if schools were going to be engaged in the process of preparing people for specialized work roles, reformers were also concerned that they inculcate common social values. A whole range of extracurricular activities were established during this period. The interesting thing about sports, student government, and the other familiar activities is that they were justified not on the basis of how much enjoyment they could provide, but on the

basis of their potential for cultivating appropriate social attitudes. Educators at the time were much taken by the idea that proper habits and dispositions could be transmitted unobtrusively, through enjoyable activities, provided that they were properly supervised.[6] Academic subjects were also brought before the bar. Offerings as diverse as Latin and history were scrutinized in terms of their probable contribution to the goals of cooperative citizenship and social efficiency.[7]

* * *

Now, where do high school sports and physical education fit into this picture? As sport historian Guy Lewis has pointed out, prominent physical educators began stressing the social and psychological aims of their subject early in the century.[8] This, as we have seen, was thoroughly consistent with the main currents of educational reform. The physical fitness aims of P.E. were never abandoned, of course. But advocates both within the field and without argued that through systematic development of the body, schools could simultaneously develop the attitudes and habits of good citizenship.

Sports would be the main instrument of this social and moral training, particularly the team sports. The natural enthusiasm for sports and games, argued physical educators, provided countless opportunities to teach cooperation, loyalty, and other civic virtues. Although there was some opposition, sports was clearly emerging as the cornerstone of the P.E. program before World War I.[9]

Adding physical education to the regular school curriculum seemed like a fine idea. In reviewing the educational literature of the period, it is hard to find anyone opposed to it. Rhetoric, however, outdistanced reality

by several years. Spurred on by the preparedness crisis of World War I, P.E. programs did not enter the public high schools on a large scale until the 1920s.[10] Although physical educators and supportive school administrators had not been immediately successful in bringing physical education into the public high schools, they helped to create an enduring model of P.E. The idea of using sports to influence social behavior remained a strong component of Physical Education during the 1920s and '30s.

* * *

Thus far, nothing has been said about interscholastic sports. Popular team sports like football and basketball more often than not preceded physical education programs into the high schools and continued to maintain a separate identity. It appears that older histories of sport have often underestimated the role of sports and games in early America. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that spectator interest in organized sports was on the rise in the late nineteenth century. High school teams, following the example of older brothers in the colleges, often organized their own games, hired coaches, secured officials, and collected their own gate receipts. Student controlled teams were on the decline by the first decade of the twentieth century, but they were still common enough to draw the ire of school administrators and physical educators.[11]

If the comments of these individuals are to be believed, these "unsupervised" contests were rife with corruption. Cheating, brawling, carousing, and gambling were the order of the day.[12] Perhaps the anecdotes of these outraged educators should be taken with a grain of salt. They seem to fit into a pattern of derision directed at professional sports and other amusements favored by the lower classes, diversions which often involved a wager. High

schools were only beginning their period of rapid expansion, so many of these early high school athlete entrepreneurs may have been scions of the middle class. It is not known whether the school administrators in any given instance were trying to save middle class youth from the squalid pastimes of the lower orders, or trying to elevate working class lads, or both.

However accurate these tales of youthful corruption may have been, they indicated that educators were taking the social role of athletics seriously. Their consternation was heightened by a belief in the wholesome qualities of properly supervised sport. Athletics, they asserted, could cultivate the very qualities so much needed in the new industrial society. They could serve as a substitute for the vigorous existence commonly attributed to hardy Anglo-Saxon forebears. But, at the same time, they could discipline rugged individualism and replace it with a spirit of teamwork.[13]

By the 1920s, athletics were not only under the control of the school, but competition between teams in most states was regulated by conferences and state high school associations. Most coaches were regular members of the faculty.[14] But, even though education had succeeded in removing the last vestiges of student control, and had set up an elaborate administrative apparatus to regulate contests between schools, two controversial issues carried over from the pre-war period. Both of these were related to the relationship between P.E. and interschool sports. They are familiar because they are still with us today.

The first problem had to do with the popularity and intensity of interschool sports. In spite of the schools' success in regulating high school athletics (a few would argue because of it), critics continued to charge that high school sports were perverted by a win-at-all-costs ethos. High school

contests in basketball and football had become popular spectator events, and disgruntled educators recognized this fact as the source of the problem. They charged that rabid fans put too much pressure on coaches, who in turn put too much pressure on students.[15] Ironically, as one insightful physical educator in New York recognized, state wide organization of high school sports increased the pressure. Standardizing competition between schools on a state wide and in some cases even an interstate level meant more was at stake. Real state championships were possible, and that prospect fired up the local community and generated space in the sports pages.[16]

If some of the leaders in physical education at the turn of the century had envisioned low keyed but hard fought games played for fun, they were doomed to disappointment. High school sports became more prestigious and spectacular during the 1920s. Educators responded in a variety of ways to these developments, but although there was certainly no shortage of discussion on the subject of high school sports during the '20s or '30s, their prominence complicates our assessment of educators' stated opinions on the subject.

It is safe to say that a considerable number of school administrators were enthusiastic supporters of high school sports. State high school athletic associations were largely composed of school principals.[17] It wasn't that these men condoned Yahooism in the stands or abusive behavior by coaches. In fact, there was a veritable epidemic of sportsmanship codes during the 1920s and '30s.[18] These administrators, however, essentially believed that interscholastic athletics were a good thing and that conditions were improving. In addition to urging good sportsmanship, they concentrated most of their attention on enforcement of eligibility requirements and other rules regulating competition between schools.

In contrast to these optimistic supporters, there was a smaller number of detractors, the ones noted a few lines above. But even though they had harsh words for interscholastic sports and some of them argued the educational superiority of intramurals, few advocated the outright abolition of interschool contests.[19] And herein lies the difficulty.

It is hard to know the extent to which school administrators' and physical educators' statements were influenced by political expediency. A number of them--probably a minority--I think would have preferred to rid high school sports of interference from fans, the press, and overly ambitious coaches. But even in the troubled financial times of the 1980s, it is difficult for a superintendent or principal to call for the elimination of the sports program although it might involve only a small portion of the student body. From what I can determine, very few programs went under during the Depression.

And this brings us to the second controversy surrounding high school athletics, namely, their exclusiveness. Except in small high schools, only a small percentage of the boys got to play.[20] Even though some educators defended interscholastic sports on the basis of their capacity to unify the student body, it was hard to ignore one obvious point. If sports afforded valuable lessons in social cooperation for some, they must be good for everyone. Such sentiments fueled the drive for systematic physical education, as we have seen.

It is not certain how many educators would have made all high school athletics intramurals if they had had a chance. The development of physical education curriculums and intramurals during the 1920s and '30s, however, never seriously threatened the prestige, let alone the existence of interscholastic athletics. The latter continued to function as a separate enterprise largely supported by gate receipts.[21]

Coaches became regular faculty members, but unlike many physical educators, their occupational identity was primarily derived from their experiences as athletes, not from their academic major. This does not mean that coaching and teaching P.E. were entirely separate professions. There was considerable overlap. Coaches apparently began to major in P.E. in increasing numbers during the 1930s. But even then, large numbers--perhaps a majority--continued to major in other subjects. The point here is that head coaches, at least, even those majoring in physical education, did their basic apprenticeship on the playing field, not in the classroom.[22]

In one sense, the historical development of physical education programs was clearly aided by the popularity of sports and the association between sports and social values. On the other hand, the relative prestige of interschool athletics saddled physical education with a role and an ideology which stunted its educational potential.

Contests between schools offered and continue to offer dramatic entertainment. The drama is enhanced by the performance of gifted athletes. The combination of drama and artistry is a major source of sport's enduring appeal at all levels--high school, college, and professional.

It can be argued that interschool competition offers a vehicle for the development of skills that are pleasing to the human eye, much as dance is aesthetically pleasing. From this point of view, athletes deserve as much attention as those who have unusual talent in art, music, or other modes of human expression. This justification for varsity level competition or the equivalent, however, has often been obscured by the familiar association between sports and a host of social and moral attributes. Athletes win our admiration when they extend themselves to the limits of their considerable powers. We also know from experience, however, that heroism on the field or

court does not necessarily produce model citizens, and yet the link between sports and character--though somewhat battered in recent years--endures.

I suspect that a second though less powerful reason for the prominence of interschool sports is that they reflect dominant social values more consistently than we often realize. Varsity athletics embody lessons that are driven home in schools and in the daily events of childhood. These lessons reinforce the idea that competition separates the deserving from the undeserving. Parents complain that their aspiring All-American deserves to play because the coach has misjudged his abilities, but few challenge the principle that only the best deserve to play. The exclusiveness of varsity sports supports commonly held notions of equal opportunity and fairness. The institutional demands of varsity sports reflect patterns of authority, cooperation, and subordination so much in evidence in the hierarchical society that America has become.[23]

Physical education has not only been hindered by the popularity of interschool games but by the social ideology of sports as well. Commitment to the physical development of non-athletes has often been reduced to token gestures in the heat of a football or basketball season. Here, let me hasten to add, I am not referring to the commitment of the individual physical education teacher necessarily, but to the overall commitment of the school and community to a truly educational P.E. program.

I don't know if it's so much the case today, but earlier in the century, arguments about the potential for P.E. to shape appropriate social behavior obscured the soundest reasons for bringing P.E. into the schools Turning to sports as the best means of fostering good citizenship shaped the growth and development of physical education, but in doing so, muted some important distinctions between the role of P.E. and varsity athletics. This is not to

suggest that sports can't contribute to good character or that they should be cut out of the physical education program. We might do well to consider, however, that designing a program to blend the already considerable skills of outstanding athletes into a maximum team performance involves different considerations than one designed to awaken the physical powers of the average student.

As a society we are concerned with encouraging the potential of those students with particular abilities in science. At the same time we need to provide a liberal education in science for the rest of the students, the overwhelming majority who will not be professional scientists. These tasks have much in common, but if we approach the subject in such a way that only the most able and dedicated can participate without a sense of shame and embarrassment, then we are not going to have an adult population with an intelligent concern with scientific issues.

In referring to students who may be "gifted" in science, I am assuming nothing in particular about inherited intelligence or aptitude. Some students develop a particular flair or interest in science, and that is what I mean by "able." I don't pretend to know why or how that happens in any general sense--only that it does.

Similarly, in speaking of the rest of the student body, I am assuming that most people are able to obtain a reasonably rigorous grasp of scientific concepts, principles, and methods. In my view, it is the school's task to search for ways to awaken the interest of all students in the world of science, not to shuttle large numbers of them into the vocational track because the interest is not yet apparent in the seventh grade. In addition to this primary commitment, schools should search for ways, perhaps outside the regular curriculum, to develop programs for the unusually talented.

It seems to me that if physical education has a place in the school curriculum, it is because it affords a unique opportunity to develop students' physical powers and thereby to promote health and a particular kind of self-knowledge. In order to aid students in discovering skills and doing things which they had no idea they could do, physical education should be particularly concerned with cultivating interest and confidence, qualities which are more likely to be taken for granted in varsity athletics. Extending one's previous limitations in running, climbing, dirt bike racing, basketball, or weight lifting can be exhilirating when freed from the fear of failure. Through sports and dozens of other activities, young people can discover powers and perhaps limitations that would have otherwise gone unheeded.

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[2]For examples of general studies of public schooling during the Progressive Era, see David Tyack, The One Best System (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Paul Violas, The Training of the Urban Working Class (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1978); and Edward Krug, The Shaping of the American High School, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

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For an historical account which stresses the emphasis on administrative expertise in Progressive Reform, see Wiebe, particularly Chapter 6.

[4]See Tyack, The One Best System, 183, for figures on enrollment. Also see Krug, 169-75. Estimates of graduation rates are found in Tyack, 183.

There was also a high dropout rate. For figures, see Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education, A Report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, U.S. Bureau of Education Bulletin No. 35, 1918 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1918), 8.

[5]See Violas, Chs. 6-8; Joel Spring, "Education and the Rise of the Corporate State," Socialist Revolution 2 (March-April, 1972), 73-101; W. Norton Grubb and Marvin Lazerson, "Rally 'Round the Workplace: Continuities and Fallacies in Career Education," Harvard Educational Review (November, 1975), 451-474; Harvey Kantor and David Tyack, eds. Work, Youth and Schooling, Historical Perspectives on Vocationalism in American Education (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982).

[6]See Violas, Ch. 5; Spring; and Timothy P. O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, 1900-1940: Shaping Citizens for Unequal Roles in the Modern Industrial State, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1979, Ch. 3 (hereinafter cited as Interscholastic Athletics, Diss.)

[7]Krug,

[8]Guy Lewis, "Adoption of the Sports Program, 1906-39: The Role of Accommodation in the Transformation of Physical Education," Quest 12 (May, 1969), 34.

[9]For a discussion of the pedagogical advantages of sports, see O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 2. See also Lewis, "Adoption of the Sports Program," and Guy Lewis, "World War I and the Emergence of Sport for the Masses," The Maryland Historian 4 (Fall, 1973), 109-22.

[10]See Thomas A. Storey, Willard Small, and Elon G. Salisbury, Recent Legislation for Physical Education, U.S. Bulletin of Education No. 1, 1922 (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1922), 5, 15; Emmett A. Rice, A Brief History of Physical Education (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company,

1926), 239-41; Lewis, "World War I and Sport for the Masses," 114. See also O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 3, 55-75; Lewis, "Adoption of the Sports Program," and Timothy P. O'Hanlon, "School Sports as Social Training: The Case of Athletics and the Crisis of World War I," Journal of Sport History 9 (Spring, 1982), 5-29.

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[13]See O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 2, 42-54, see also Ch. 4; O'Hanlon, "School Sports and Social Training," ; Violas, Ch.5.

[14]See Lewis Hoch Wagenhorst, The Administration and Cost of High School Interscholastic Athletics, Teachers College Contributions to Education, No. 205 (New York: Bureau of Publication, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1926), 9, 15, 81-82. Also see O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4, 140-149. See Ch. 5, 207-231 for a discussion of the development of athletic coaching as a distinct occupation. For a further discussion,

see O'Hanlon, "Alienated Play," unpublished paper, 1981.

[15]See O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 5, 207-208, 231-234; Ch. 4, 149-149, 161-170; and O'Hanlon, "Alienated Play."

[16]The insightful physical educator was Frederick Rand Rogers. See his The Future of Interscholastic Athletics (New York: Bureau of Publications, Columbia University, 1929), 4-5. An account of Rogers' argument appears in O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4, 166-168.

[17]See O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4, 182-183. Also see note beginning on bottom of p. 182.

[18]For an account of sportsmanship codes, see O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4, 150-161.

[19]For example, criticisms of varsity athletics compared to the benefits of intramurals appear in Nathan C. Tolman, "What's Wrong with Secondary School Athletics?" Sierra Educational News 30 (December, 1934), 29-33; and J. B. Buehler, "Why Interscholastic Athletics?" Sierra Educational News 28 (December, 1932), 34-35 and 52. See also O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4, 170-174, 177, and 197.

[20]O'Hanlon, "Alienated Play," and O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4, 174-177.

[21]For a discussion of the stability of varsity athletic programs, see O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4, 161-197, and "School Sports as Social Training."

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[22]O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 5, 207-231. See also "Alienated Play."

[23]For variations of this argument, see O'Hanlon, "School Sports as Social Training," 11-14; "Alienated Play," O'Hanlon, Interscholastic Athletics, Diss., Ch. 4 (especially 195-197), Ch. 5, 250-284, and Ch. 6. A similar argument is presented in Timothy P. O'Hanlon, "Interscholastic Athletics: Shaping Citizens for Unequal Roles in the Modern Industrial State," Educational Theory, 30 (Spring, 1980), 89-103.